

A shocking discovery at the Bradford House

MEGAN SCALLAN MELVIN, CURATOR

DUXBURY RURAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Bradford House has an incredible collection of objects exclusively owned and used by four generations of the Bradford family. One particular object, recently "discovered" in a dresser drawer, has raised a lot of fascinating questions about the use of the item in the Bradford household and 19th century alternative medicine.

Electroshock therapy was a popular treatment method in America and across Europe during the second half of the 19th century. The first such apparatus was made by M. Hippolyte of Paris in 1832. The machine at the Bradford House, also French, was created by Adolphe Gaiffe (1830-1903) of Paris and was called an Appareil D'induction Volta Faradique Brevett. This remedy was made popular by the medical discipline known as galvanism. Galvanism used "therapeutic" applications of electric currents to the body to stimulate muscle contraction. Gaiffe's machine delivered a series of electric shocks through the skin and tissue of patients. Electrotherapy could be applied to many different parts of the body. It was considered an indispensable machine by practitioners of alternative medicine in the curing of most ailments, including everything from a sore tooth to an aching foot, helping with weight loss or combating hair loss.

The original device consisted of a hydrogen mercury cell battery, a brass cylinder containing two electrodes inside, and a set of cables attached to two metal handles, which allowed the current to flow from the cylinder to the handles. The interrupter design allowed users to change voltage and pulse of the device from a gentle tingle to much stronger high voltage electrical shock. Some patients claimed the shocks were effective in relieving their pain and symptoms.

Such a device could have been therapeutic for Elizabeth Bradford (1809-1890) who suffered from a stroke, which left her bedridden during the last seven years of her life. The Bradford sisters are indeed documented as being interested in alternative medicine, including seeking consultation from a "Mrs. Baker, the mind doctor." The Mrs. Baker mentioned appears to be Hellen A. Baker of Hanson, Massachusetts who was a known "Christian Science Healer." It is difficult to identify who owned the electro-therapy device, but the suggestion of such practices in Duxbury is a truly remarkable one, widening our understanding of home medicine in the mid-late 19th century.